

He scoured Utah for plants thought to be extinct. Now, they're taking root again.

Native plants return to the Jordan River watershed thanks to a Salt Lake City project to boost biodiversity, public health and water quality.

By JOSE DAVILA IV

The native slough sedge was functionally extinct in Utah when Blake Wellard found a tiny patch of the tall, green wetland plant along a stretch of the Weber River in Coalville. The sedge had hung on next to what is now the Historic Union Pacific Rail Trail thanks, in part, to the rumbling trains of the past that had blocked cows and other disturbances from accessing its habitat.

Now, Wellard has planted enough of the stately sedge that it can pollinate itself in a swampy portion of a small, human-made wetland off of Cornell Street in the Rose Park neighborhood of Salt Lake City.

"We have never had these make seeds in this volume before," said Wellard, a restoration ecologist for the city. "This is the very first time we're seeing this plant really demonstrating it likes this space and wants to stay."

The sedge, along with other species like the currently blooming sheep monkeyflower and the favorite snack of bumblebees, the Great Plains aster, is part of a native plant restoration project headed by the city's Public Lands Department.

Since 2019, Wellard and his team have planted historic local wetland species at five locations in the Jordan River watershed: the Cornell wetland, Poplar Grove's Five Wellard Preserve, Glendale's Three Creeks Confluence, Mary's Spring at Parley's Historic Nature Park in the southeastern corner of the city and Fairmont Park in Sugar House. They hope to boost biodiversity—which has health benefits for humans—and improve water quality in the Jordan River.

Native planting efforts in the Cornell wetland started about 2 1/2 years ago. For now, the native species only cover about 0.4 acres of the property, but eventually, city officials want them to cover three acres.

As it stands, invasive species like the pesky, short-lived bulbous bluegrass take up wide swaths of the property, so successful planting efforts require more attention and care. Along one stretch of stream bank, Wellard's team used a flame thrower to burn evenly spaced circular holes in a plastic tarp, then planted native seeds in each of those holes, making it easier to keep invasive species away and weed them out when they do emerge.

Despite only having covered a sliver of the property, Wellard said his team has planted 76 species already. They plan to embed 12,000 individual plants here this year.

"This will be a substantial restoration project when it's done, and we'd like this to be a greater demonstration for what restoration along the Jordan River can look like," Wellard said. "And though this project might be small, right now, I tend to look at it through the lens of fine-tuning. The portion size might be small, but the quality is extremely high."

The city has collected its own seed bank and grows its own plants at a greenhouse on the University of Utah's main campus. The habitat restoration industry doesn't sell a lot of the seeds the program needs, especially for such a small plot of land.

Thanks to Wellard spending his 20s searching for plants lost to Utah's development since the arrival of European Americans, the city has quite a collection of seeds, as well as historical documentation of plants dating back to the 1850s.

"I became disillusioned in my 20s, seeing



PHOTOS BY FRANCISCO KJOLSETH / The Salt Lake Tribune

Left » Water parsnip takes root at a University of Utah greenhouse.
Below » Tyler Murdock, deputy director of Salt Lake City's Public Lands Department, left, and Blake Wellard, restoration ecologist, tour the Cornell wetland.
Inset » Wellard shows where giant bur-reed and other native plants have taken root.



the same 35 plants over and over again, but I had a book that had 3,000 species in it," Wellard said. "So, like, where's the rest of this diversity? I became obsessed with trying to find it. So, I

started looking in all the corners and forgotten pastures and places around the valley, the Wasatch Front."

Now that more native plants are in the ground at the Cornell wetland, city officials think it will take about three years for those plant communities to be successful, manage themselves and outcompete invasive species.

The project isn't without its challenges, though. On a Wednesday morning visit to the wetland, trash sat half-submerged in the muddy pond area. Someone had pitched a tent on one of the boardwalks on the property. Jordan River Trail walkers strolled by, too.

That's one of the challenges that we deal with every day, balancing human and recreational impacts and benefits of biodiversity and habitat improvements," said Tyler Murdock, the city's deputy director of public lands. "Sometimes, we're going to want people to interact with us if we want to have them as educational spaces. Other times, we're going to try and restrict access as much as we can and have people observe at a distance and learn about why we're protecting those spaces."

Murdock specifically mentioned a project at the other end of town that has faced challenges. The city has fenced off a portion of Parley's Historic Nature Park to protect native plant species in an area that some dog owners had been using as an off-leash dog run, a decision that sparked a bit of backlash.

But Murdock and Wellard believe the program will benefit residents' lives more than it will hinder them.

For one, it makes the environment prettier. More unique plants create a longer flowering season with different species blooming at different times. That means you could visit the property next week and then again next month and have a different experience as plants hit their colorful peaks at separate times.

Native plants also clean up the

environment by soaking up harmful pollutants. The original intent of the project at the Cornell wetland was to clean stormwater runoff before it made it into the Jordan River. The waterway has long struggled with cleanliness and is still considered impaired or not meeting water quality standards for some activities.

Biodiversity can boost human health beyond just cleaning water that flows into the Jordan River.

"Happiness and greater well-being for people improves when spending time in some of

these natural spaces," Wellard said. "And this has been a historically neglected space and we would like to pump a lot of resources and improve the accessibility to natural resources along the Jordan River."

Murdock and Wellard hope to add more properties across Utah's capital to the program in the future. They also want to see more public-facing education and events happening at an outdoor classroom within the Cornell wetland.

And, of course, they'll be keeping tabs on the recovering slough sedge and its friends.

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Monkeyflower blooms have emerged at the Cornell wetland area along the Jordan River.

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